[**Reconciliation in Balochistan?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1634362/reconciliation-in-balochistan)

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THIS past week has been full of surprises for the people of Balochistan. First, Prime Minister Imran Khan said during his Gwadar visit that he was [considering holding talks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1633359) with the Baloch nationalists. Later, a media report claimed that the federal cabinet had given the go-ahead for discussions with annoyed Baloch tribes. As a sign of quick implementation, the Prime Minister [appointed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1634180) Jamhoori Watan Party chief and MNA Shahzain Bugti as his special assistant on reconciliation and harmony in the province.

Shahzain Bugti, a grandson of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti who was [killed in a military operation](https://www.dawn.com/news/207726/bugti-killed-in-operation-six-officers-among-21-security-personnel-dead) during Gen Musharraf’s dictatorial rule, wasn’t one of his grandfather’s favourite relatives as his father Talal Bugti did not enjoy amiable ties with Nawab Bugti. Apparently, the latter favoured another grandson Brahamdagh Bugti, who lives in exile in Switzerland and heads the Baloch Republican Party and is said to control the insurgency operations of the banned Baloch Republican Army. It is not yet certain if Shahzain Bugti will talk to his cousin as Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has said the government will [only negotiate](https://www.dawn.com/news/1633522) with Baloch tribes that have no links with India.

Mr Chaudhry’s statement has apparently created confusion about who the government is actually planning to talk to. The prime minister rightly stated that other countries were using Baloch insurgents because of their old grievances, and negotiations will eliminate the Indian leverage. However, the information minister’s statement did not reflect this logic. It raised the question of the authority and mandate of the Shahzain Bugti-led reconciliation overture. Apparently, the mandate of the special assistant is to create harmony among various camps in the provincial government, as differences within the cabinet and the ruling party keep erupting from time to time. As almost all Baloch insurgent leaders are ‘considered’ to have links with India, he may be talking to Baloch nationalist parties which are already in the political mainstream. Perhaps this is why opposition leaders are calling his appointment a political bribe.

It is surprising to see the government announcing reconciliation in Balochistan when security institutions are giving the impression that the situation is fully under control and insurgents cannot pose a major threat. The security agencies’ optimism is also growing because of the changing situation in Afghanistan where, they believe, the Afghan Taliban upsurge will shrink the space for the Baloch insurgent leadership hiding there. Although some argue that Baloch insurgent leaders have the option of relocating to Iran or India, most experts believe that more Taliban control in Afghanistan will mean less shelter and support for the Baloch leaders there, which could negatively impact their operations inside Pakistan.

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If the government thinks the Baloch insurgent leadership is stressed and thus willing to negotiate, it should hold serious consultations with its recent and past partners in the provincial and federal governments as well as other Baloch nationalist parties. In the absence of any such effort, the leaders and people of Balochistan will view the new initiative suspiciously. Especially if the person leading the initiative doesn’t enjoy the trust of the Baloch leadership.

The grievances of Baloch citizens are economic and political, and they are as old as Pakistan itself. High-handed policies in Balochistan including an emphasis on military solutions have aggravated the feeling of alienation among the Baloch. The issue of missing persons is a central point in Balochistan-centre ties; the resolution of this issue is the Baloch nationalist leadership’s primary demand.

The prime minister is correct in linking Baloch grievances to insufficient development in the province. He had announced a Rs600 billion development package for Balochistan, which is higher compared with the provincial budget. How will the government conceive, execute and run the development projects? How will transparency be ensured? The political leadership and provincial government don’t enjoy the trust of the establishment, for all their inclinations and loyalties. They are always projected as corrupt. And yet, who manages to bring them to power?

Balochistan’s issue can be resolved through employing better political strategies. Every government can showcase what they have done for the province. The PPP government (2008-13) had introduced the [Aghaz-i-Huqooq-i-Balochistan package](https://www.dawn.com/news/852744/joint-session-of-na-senate-on-balochistan-package-to-be-tabled-today), besides giving concessions to the province in the seventh NFC award. It had also formed a committee for exploring reconciliation prospects.

**Read:** [*Religion, nationalism and insurgency in Balochistan*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1493929)

The PML-N government (2013-18) followed in the same footsteps and made the reconciliation with Baloch insurgent leaders a clause of the National Action Plan announced in January 2015. When Dr Abdul Malik Baloch was chief minister, he was given the mandate by the top military brass to pursue political reconciliation with all stakeholders. A provincial government delegation even went to Switzerland where Dr Baloch himself negotiated with Brahamdagh Bugti in Geneva and conveyed the demands and reservations of the separatist leader to the military high-ups upon his return. He said it was not difficult to meet these demands, but yet the whole process was halted without any explanation being provided.

Now the PTI government wants to take the lead in the reconciliation process. Though the establishment doesn’t trust its own ‘blue-eyed’ provincial set-up on financial issues, the Balochistan government can be trusted in political affairs. When the provincial government is not taken on board on such sensitive issues, it gives the impression that the establishment is not supportive of the reconciliation idea, and the appointment of Shahzain Bugti is given as an example. The nationalist leadership has not been taken on board and an [editorial](https://www.dawn.com/news/1633608/talking-to-insurgents) on these pages has rightly pointed out that the government should have involved nationalist leaders such as Dr Malik and BNP-M’s Akhtar Mengal to show it is serious about the reconciliation process. A broader committee can be formed for this purpose comprising members of the treasury benches and political stakeholders in parliament.

Such a committee should also have a clear mandate and the authority to make and honour commitments with angry Baloch leaders. Constant engagement with the pro-insurgent movement will have its own advantages and reduce the security costs in the province.

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